

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L PEKING 1948

EXDIS

DEPARTMENT PASS CINCPAC/POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR OVIP CH US (SCHLESINGER, JAMES)

SUBJECT: SCHLESINGER MEETING WITH PRC DEFENSE MINISTER YEH CHIEN-
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1. BEGIN INTORUDCTION AND SUMMARY. FORMER DEFENSE SECRETARY JAMES SCHLESINGER AND FOUR MEMBERS OF HIS DELEGATION MET FOR 2-1/2 HOURS ON THE AFTERNOON OF SEPTEMBER 27 WITH PRC DEFENSE MINISTER AND PARTY VICE CHAIRMAN YEN CHIEN-YING. ACCORDING TO ORAL BRIEFING OF USLO OFFICER BY ONE OF THE DELEGATION MEMBERS, YEH'S PRESENTATION WAS CANDID, NONIDEOLOGICAL, AND NARROWLY FOCUSSED ON MILITARY AFFAIRS; HE SPOKE THROUGHOUT AS A PROFESSIONAL MILITARY MAN, NOT A PARTY LEADER, SETTING OUT FOR DR. SCHLESINGER CHINA'S CURRENT ASSESSMENT OF THE SOVIET THREAT AND ITS CONTINGENCY PLANNING FOR MILITARY RESPONSE TO ANY SOVIET ATTACK. YEH'S SOLE REFERENCE TO THE US WAS A PERFUNCTORY CLOSING QUESTION ABOUT NOVEMBER ELECTION PROSPECTS; HE MADE NO MENTION OF SINO-US RELATIONS, THE SHANGHAI COMMUNIQUE, OR TAIWAN. YEH IMPRESSED DELEGATION MEMBERS AS PHYSICALLY FRAIL BUT MENTALLY SHARP. END INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY.

2. THE SOVIET THREAT. YEH LEFT NO DOUBT THAT CHINA REGARDS THE
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SOVIET UNION AS ITS PRIMARY CONTEMPORARY ENEMY. WITHOUT DIRECTLY

CHALLENGING THE OFFICIAL LINE SANCTIFIED AT THE AUGUST 1973 PARTY CONGRESS THAT MOSCOW IS "FEINTING TO THE EAST BUT ATTACKING TO THE WEST," YEH SPOKE NOT AT ALL OF SOVIET AGGRESSIVE DESIGNS IN WESTERN EUROPE. HE PROPOSED INSTEAD THAT THE SOVIET UNION WOULD NOT DARE ATTACK CHINA OUT OF CONCERN FOR THE POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC VULNERABILITY OF ITS REAR. A THRUST AGAINST CHINA, YEH INTIMATED, WOULD LOOSEN THE SOVIET HOLD OVER ITS EASTERN EUROPEAN SATELLITES AND WOULD INVITE A PUNISHING NATO COUNTERATTACK.

3. CONTINGENCIES AND CHINESE STRATEGY. IF DESPITE ALL LOGIC THE USSR DID ATTACK, CHINA WOULD INSTANTLY ADOPT A "PEOPLE'S WAR" STRATEGY. SCHLESINGER QUESTIONED THE FEASIBILITY OF PEOPLE'S WAR, HYPOTHESIZING THAT A THRUST INTO CHINA WAS LESS LIKELY THAN, OR EXAMPLE, A MOVE TO LOP OFF A PIECE OF CHINESE TERRITORY SUCH AS SINKIANG. YEH ALLOWED THAT CHINESE PLANNERS HAD ENVISAGED SUCH A POSSIBILITY, WOULD NOT TOLERATE SUCH A "NIBBLING OPERATION" SUCH AS THE JAPANESE HAD ADOPTED IN THE 1930S, AND WOULD IMMEDIATELY LAUNCH AN "ALL-OUT ATTACK" ON THE USSR. (YEH DID NOT AMPLIFY ON THE FORM SUCH AN ATTACK MIGHT TAKE. HE DID STRESS CHINA'S APPRECIATION OF THE NEED FOR MODERN WEAPONS AT ANOTHER POINT IN THE CONVERSATION, HOWEVER, POINTING TO THE RECENT NUCLEAR TEST AS EVIDENCE OF PROGRESS IN THAT AREA.)

4. SCHLESINGER NOTED THAT SOVIET TANKS WERE NUMEROUS AND FORMIDABLE, SUGGESTED THAT "PEOPLE'S WAR" WOULD BE AN INADEQUATE RESPONSE TO A MASSIVE SOVIET TANK PUSH ACROSS THE BORDER, AND RECOMMENDED THAT THE CHINESE MIGHT PROFIT FROM A STUDY OF THE ISRAELI TANK CAMPAIGN DURING THE 1973 MIDDLE EAST WAR. TERMING SUCH ADVICE "FRIENDLY," YEH RESPONDED THAT CHINA RECOGNIZED ITS WEAKNESSES AND, HAVING THESE IN MIND, HAD ALREADY STUDIED CAREFULLY THE LESSONS OF THAT CAMPAIGN.

5. THE SCHLESINGER DELEGATION MEMBER PRIVATELY EXPRESSED TO USLO OFFICER THE DELEGATION'S SURPRISE AT YEH'S RATHER OFFHAND ASSUMPTION -- PRESUMABLY REFLECTING HIGH-LEVEL ESTIMATES -- THAT THE SOVIET S LACK THE LOGISTICAL WHEREWITHAL TO SUSTAIN A PROTRACTED WAR AGAINST CHINA. WHEN YEH SPECIFICALLY MENTIONED A SOVIET SHORTAGE OF PETROLEUM AND FOOD, SCHLESINGER POINTED OUT THAT THE USSR IS CURRENTLY A NET EXPORTER OF PETROLEUM AND WOULD DOUBTLESS BE "LESS GENEROUS" IN EVENT OF WAR. YEH SEEMED GENUINELY ASTONISHED AT THIS ASSESSMENT, SEEKING FROM SCHLESINGER SOMEWHAT LATER IN THE CONVERSATION A REITERATION OF HNIS VIEW.

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SATION A REITERATION OF HNIS VIEW.

6. THE MILITIA. YEH SPOKE BRIEFLY OF THE MILITIA AS ANOTHER INPUT TO PEOPLE'S WAR, BUT ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THE ONE MILLION MEMBERS OF THE MODEL SHANGHAI MILITIA HAD ONLY ONE THOUSAND ARTILLERY PIECES.

7. SINO-US RELATIONS. YEH MADE NO MENTION WHATSOEVER OF BILATERAL

SINO-US RELATIONS, TAIWAN (EXCEPT IN THE CONTEXT OF JAPANESE ISLAND STRATEGY DURING WORLD WAR II), OR THE SHANGHAI COMMUNIQUE. IN FACT, YEH'S ONLY REFERENCE TO THE US WAS A CLOSING INQUIRY IN THE CHOU EN-LAI STYLE: MORE A FLATTERING DISPLAY OF DETAILED KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE VISITOR'S COUNTRY THAN A QUESTION POSED TO ELICIT USEFUL INFORMATION. NOTING THAT THE US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION WOULD BE HELD IN NOVEMBER 2 AND THAT CURRENT POLLS SHOWED DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE CARTE R AHEAD IN 30 STATES, YEH ASKED FOR SCHLESINGER'S ASSESSMENT OF THE PROBABLE OUTCOME.

8. STYLE, HEALTH, AND ATMOSPHERICS. THE 77-YEAR-OLD YEH, WHO HAD STOOD ERECT IN PUBLIC VIEW FOR THE ONE HALF HOUR MEMORIAL CEREMONY FO R MAO A WEEK EARLIER, ENTERED THE ROOM SUPPORTED BY AN ATTENDANT. BUT DESPITE HIS EVIDENT PHYSICAL INFIRMITIES YEH CAME ACROSS AS MENTALLY A ACUTE. HE MADE A CURSORY GLANCE AT HIS ONE-PAGE BRIEFING PAPER AFTER SEATING HIMSELF BUT CARRIED ON THE SUBSEQUENT DIALOGUE WITHOUT REFERENCE TO NOTES OR COLLEAGUES PRESENT. SURPRISINGLY, DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF YANG CHENG-WU OFFERED IDEOLOGICAL INTERJECTIONS RATHER THAN SUBSTANTIVE MILITARY CLARIFICATIONS. (YEH WAS GUILTY OF ONE GLARING BUT INTRIGUING SLIP. MISQUOTING MAO'S DICTUM AS "DIG TUNNELS DEEP, STORE GRAIN EVERYWHERE, AND PREPARE AGAINST WARFARE," YEH WAS HASTILY CORRECTED BY YANG, WHO SUPPLIED THE CORRECT THIRD PHRASE "NEVER SEEK HEGEMONY.")

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